Contemporary Arabic Literature

Farooq Shooshah

BEAUTY BATHING IN THE RIVER

POEMS

translated from Arabic,
with an introduction,
by

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Egyptian State Publishing House (GEBO)
CAIRO 2003



Contemporary Arabic Literature

A Series of Arabic books, done into English,
Published by the General Egyptian Book Organization
under, the Supervision of

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BEAUTY BATHING IN THE RIVER

Introduction

With three collections in English to his credit, *The Language of Lovers' Blood, Time to Catch Time* and *An Ebony Face*, complete with critical 'introductions', Farooq Shoushah should need no further 'introduction'. I had actually flirted with the idea of doing without such 'introduction' altogether, allowing the work to speak for itself, especially as I present not a selection but an entire volume of verse, but realized that the poet's departure from earlier 'techniques' should be explained, even briefly. Reading through the original, in much the same way I read any collection of Arabic verse (for the joy of it, naturally, never with a view to translation !) I was struck by the maturer vision of the poet that seems to have dictated a maturer technique. In the earlier selections rendered into English, as I have noted in my 'introductions', Shooshah

adopts what I have called 'the circular' form in the first, manages to adjust his tone 'to reflect an individual *Weltanschauung*, characterized by occasional touches of *Weltschmerz*', in the second, then proceeds in *An Ebony Face* to produce a dramatic form so taut as to represent a novel technique in modern Arabic verse. ('Introduction' to *An Ebony Face*, GEBO, Cairo, 2000, p. 6). In the last volume the means of achieving this is 'tone', with the emphasis on maintained paradoxes and what I have called 'contrarieties'. This feature ensures close ties with modern poetry world-wide, particularly with the eminent poets of the 'movement' in England, and the 'new wave' in the United States; but it has also meant that Shooshah departs drastically from contemporary Arabic poets, variously 'romantic' and still in the tight grip of our tradition. He has done this beautifully in *An Ebony Face*, but he now further develops to reveal a heightened consciousness of form, in its ultra-modernist sense, by utilizing, almost in every poem, the power of the single, dominant image to unify and focus experience.

In *Beauty Bathing in the River* certain images are given the power, in one poem after another, to concentrate the

feelings of individual moments into a focus, like a convex lens, by both the earlier method of 'circularity' and the typically Wordsworthian method of 'repeated attacks', but with the difference that, in this volume, we never lose sight of the central metaphor which is kept at varying distances from the reader until finally crystallized. This is sometimes done by recourse to primordial images, such as that of water, be it in the form of rain, river, sea etc, but, often enough, such an archetypal image is endowed with higher significance, such as 'man-in-Nature' in the opening poem, or 'time' in 'O Summer ! that's gone too soon !' Even the ostensibly 'nationalist' poems, such as 'You have my heart !', are given meanings that turn them into the kind of high-meditative verse that only the mature Shooshah could produce : for as the image ramifies and expands, the reader becomes more conscious of the implications for the human condition of each poetic-dramatic situation created.

Let me give an example of the deceptively 'romantic' 'O Summer !' which illustrates, adequately I should say, what I mean by the power of the single image. The very first line recalls T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the scene of evening desolation on the river bank, but also

Wordsworth's scene of desertion on the 'public way' at night when it looks like a 'theatre fresh-emptied of spectators'. The intertextuality may not be intentional, but its effect is undeniable : the sense of 'vacancy', dexterously produced by Philip Larkin's 'At Home', is established as a central image with time as the principal actor generating such 'vacancy', so reminiscent of the Shakespearean :

> Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back
> Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
>
> *Troilus & Cressida*, III, iii, 145-6

'So soon' is therefore the key to the central image; emphasizing the nature of summer that 'hath all too short a date' (Sonnet xviii, 4), together with the 'fleeting year' (Sonnet 97, 2). But as with all dynamic images, it develops into scenes from actual experience, such as the situation in Jerusalem or Bagdad, and is therefore given further significance. Questions are asked which are implicit or even inherent in the image of time : if time means change, will it bring about any change in such real-life situations ? 'If winter comes', Shelley has wondered, 'can spring be far behind' ? Can the summer, not the winter, 'of our discontent' pass away ? Summer may indeed represent a '

brief recess, a period of relaxation, that is, of 'separation from time' (hence the 'vacancy') but it must go, with ruthless inevitability; shouldn't the change that is implied apply to real-life situations also ?

Initially the questions are given paradoxical answers : We cannot tell, from the way the answers are phrased, whether the 'fleeting' summer has changed anything, is capable of bringing about any change, or that it has only helped to confirm the impossibility of change. 'You have not given us ... More experience of time' is elaborated into the extended image :

> ... the experiences your hands bury
> In the sand are
> Trampled under-foot
> By passers-by !
> The sand smothers
> The footsteps,
> People,
> Passions,
> And dreams,
> Power,
> And innocent merry-making —

Leaving nothing behind
But a strange feeling
And giddiness !

In other words, the 'experience of time' is doomed; as 'sand', an equivalent in the Arabic tradition of 'dust', will *bury* everything, not excluding that essential 'experience'. But a further elaboration of the same image brings out the inherent paradox, essential to the meaning of the central image, namely that the poet is now *aware* that people are *unaware* of time, represented by the 'beach / Extending for ever' (a Byronic metaphor) and only punctuated by the 'nights' ! Awareness of something that is always elusive, stealing away, 'slipping from us', negates the 'unawareness', so to speak, of confrontation with time as it takes shape on the beach, necessitating a change in 'tense' : We now move in *time* to a later moment as the lovers are not merely 'departing' but are actually *departed* ! And this, in turn, brings in an earlier, much earlier moment of a (first ?) consciousness of time when summer had given the poet a treasure — a hope for the future. This consciousness combines with the later experience to form a paradox, not a synthesis, implying that man is aware and unaware *at once*

of time's ephemerality and duration. So much so, in fact, that the paradox appears more of a polemic, as the rest of the poem unfolds. The two poles of such a polemic seem to exchange places, which requires a fresh start with the repetition of the refrain 'O Summer ! ...' The apostrophe marks the turns in the polemic, as we move from :

> O summer ! that's gone too soon !
> Stop,
> Tarry !
> You're hardly aware
> Of what you've given me ! ...
> O generous giver !

to :

> Stop ! Tarry !
> In Jerusalem will come a winter
> Heavier than any other;

to :

> Stop ! Tarry !
> O summer, going away ! ...
> When will Bagdad be rid

Of the rampant pestilence,
When will in Bagdad rest
The verse of poets ?
When will God's wrath be lifted
From these skies ?

In other words, there is as much future as there is past, and only *awareness* can make the combination possible. I have stressed the question of awareness because it appears to me to be the core of the paradox — almost in a phenomenological sense. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the image operates, in effect, in the poet's consciousness, that the early recognition of the passing away of summer is behind the recognition of its inevitable recurrence, that is to say, only through the acceptance of passing away can man hope for a future. Hence the compelling *finale* which begins yet again with the incantatory

O summer ! that's gone too soon !
Stop ! Tarry !
What will you have to say
To the thousands coming
From the four corners of the earth ?

And the Wordsworthian echo in 'Was it for this ?' in the concluding lines :

> Was it for this that you
> O summer ! have looked
> So long so charming ?...
> Leaving behind in the heart
> A burden pressing
> Heavily weighing ?

I have dwelt at length on the power of the single image in this poem so as to illustrate Shooshah's 'new' technique, though not totally new in him, and it may be wiser to describe it as the way in which he makes a dominant image operate both as the focal point of a vision and as a 'structural principle'. Before illustrating the operation of this 'principle' from a similarly structured poem, I shall cite a differently built poem though dealing with the same theme, this time explicitly, but with a twist in the structure.

'The Train of Time' handles the same image, I have suggested, in a different structure : rather than the repeated attacks relying on a zigzagging chronological movement, we now have linear development rising to a surprising

climax. The poem is written in the present tense and represents consecutive moments of the action constituting the image — a novel technique indeed ! We move in time as *successive points in consciousness* : each emphasizing the passing away of the previous one, even as the action unfolds (with things happening one after another) until we find ourselves compelled to acknowledge the legacy of 'sorrows' that such passing away occasions. The concrete image of the train (note the word-play) is made, even at the outset, to carry the implications of the *finale* : it is a night train, the whistle of which echoes in the circumambient vacancy for ever, as the sound vanishes — having been the evidence in the night of something that *was* here ! The dark of night is also an essential element of that image : it is the only certain thing that any journey should lead to, as the poet would have it, 'mad, overwhelming' and totally incomprehensible ! At each successive moment of consciousness the feeling is amplified in the typically Wordsworthian style of 'incremental repetition' — 'amplified' but not modified, for the advance in time here, as in Larkin's 'Aubade', brings us nearer death, hence the 'sorrows' of the coda. Nothing can stop that train of time,

not even the consummation of love, as the night waits with gaping jaws to swallow all, just as it swallows the train. Even the substitution of 'good' for 'bad' times cannot stop that breathlessly advancing train ! Such a structure secures unity for the poem, of course, but it is a different kind of unity from the one secured by the 'repeated attacks' which reveal varying 'time perspectives', as marked by the frequent use of a refrain in 'O Summer' and 'You have my heart !'.

'Repeated attacks' are best illustrated by the latter poem and manage to produce what I have elsewhere called an 'incantatory effect' Each of the six parts of 'You have my heart' begins with these very words, and the poem ends with them. That this phrase, modified from the exclamatory 'Have a heart !' serves both as a central image, repeated with variations from one part of the poem to the next, and as a structural principle, is shown by the build-up of images which spring from the image of a man in a predicament. The poem is addressed to Amr Moussa, Secretary General of the Arab League, who is entrusted with a task almost impossible to fulfill — to unite the Arabs !

In part after part of this long poem, the reader encounters images that call for 'pity' (or sympathy) for the man, hence the title which I have elected not to interpret into 'I pity you !' or 'you have my sympathy !' but to render the Arabic original with words as close to the 'source text' as I could find, at the risk of departing from idiomatic English. The reason is obvious : the word 'heart' is played upon as symbolic of the 'core' truth averted by the 'antagonistic brothers' and as opposed to the 'heartlessness' of such odd 'brothers'. Sometimes the play on the word is spelt out :

> [You] advance, up the path of pride ...
> Carrying a heart consistently dissolving
> In the great homeland that made you !

Sometimes it is only implied :

> Even as I watch eyefuls of
> Sorrow being poured —
> With power to crush the ribs !

but the opposition with the disarray of the 'Arab home' is always explicit. There is always a contrast between what is shown and what is hidden, what is spoken and what is 'lurking' underneath, and this other 'heart' of the matter is

obliquely hinted at. His heart (a soul filled / With the sorrows of people) is in sharp contrast with the hearts that are rotten to the 'core' :

> For worms are boring in the turbans,
> In moustaches and beards !

Such contrasts become, amazingly, a central image, or a kind of leitmotif, controlling the structure of the poem. This is, as far as I know, quite new in modern Arabic poetry, especially as the contrast is handled as unobtrusively as to be almost imperceptible. Dark is contrasted with light — an archetype, it is true, but the way the poet handles the contrast reverses the implication of each, so that the 'liars' tell their lies 'in broad daylight' whilst the protagonist continues to be 'in the dark', looking for a ray of light !

Contrast becomes therefore another structural principle, and the poet uses it most effectively in the beautiful 'Absent Painting'. The 'painting' is obviously a map of the stolen Arab land, now 'absent' (because stolen); in other words, the poet is inviting us to look at a painting of 'absence' — at what is there, but isn't ! The classicists call this figure of speech *occupatio*, but then this is not a figure of speech; it

is a *tour de force* in image-making technique, and shows how much the poet has developed. The plainly 'political' theme has turned in the hands of Shooshah into a philosophical quest, an almost epistemological point, inviting a counter-point which the reader is expected to provide. Put differently, is the real always the same as the true ? If different, how can we know which is which ? This is the nearest poem to Wordsworth's 'The Reverie of Poor Susan', and is equally short (one of the shortest in the volume) possibly because of the great condensation of the theme. Apparently a paradox, the contrast here works as a thesis – antithesis dynamic, without ever reaching a synthesis. And this is what I have claimed to be the distinguishing element of the new image in Shooshah.

I should also mention a feature of Shooshah's new image-making technique that has compounded the difficulty of rendering him into English — the mixture of classical with modern idiom. I have dealt with this difficulty, as best as I could, by mixing formal with colloquial idioms but more importantly by faithfully echoing his phraseology. Regarding this as well as other translation difficulties, I

would like to refer the reader to my *On Translating Arabic : a cultural approach*, Cairo, 2000.

In conclusion I must state, yet again, that Shooshah is not an easy poet to translate, but one that must be translated ! No knowledge of modern Arabic poetry can be complete without him, and I hope I have preserved some of the flavour of the original Arabic.

M. Enani
Cairo, 2003

I have been in possession of myself
Since I abandoned my avidity;
Despair is free, hope a slave !

(Mahyar al-Daylami)

Though blaming those who envy me,
I can never deny
My being a chastisement to them !

(Al-Mutanabbi)

They told a lie, brandishing a sword,
And claimed 'tis true; you said, 'indeed !'

(Al-Ma'arri)

People of my city
This is what I say :
Explode or die !
A terror greater than this will come,
You will not be saved by seeking refuge
At the highest summit of the mountain of
silence
Or in the depths of jungles !

(Abdul-Saboor)

The sea of passion,
Dripping from her eyes,
Generating precious pearls,
Tempted the waves to call her,
And make her yield .
She had been in seclusion on the bank !
Around her seagulls leaped
And flew by turns,
But she intently stared
At the quivering water,
Unable to undress
To witness her bare truth,
The perfection of feminine
Splendour in her !
Now melting in the embrace,

Dreading the approach of the waning pace,
She's shaken to the bone by a tremor !
Beauty does her ablution in her river.
Here is
A river of milk,
A river of light,
A river of streaming milky light;
Shades of evergreen cypresses
Stretch their palms above her,
Announcing,
At the revelation of the body,
Getting ready to start,
That an hour may be spent,
Whilst she is about to depart !
The river,
Which has been lying in wait,
Now bathes in Beauty,
Having cast off his diffidence,
Extends his fingers
To the perfection of magnificence,
Is tempted to hold a dialogue,
But as she wouldn't respond,

He makes do with the revealing touch !
Bathing is she in the daylight !
She puts off drying her body
Until evening,
With musk anointing
All her appointments,
Dreaming of the golden knight,
Recalling the flashing light !

* * *

My icon is filled with a solid body,
A staring body,
With reverberating breaths
In the space hanging down,
Which set oil on fire,
Free a bird that flaps its wings,
Dropping its fore-feathers
On the ruby of the heart;
The dancing flame is extinguished,
But the light survives
In a look, agitated !

Are you a eucalyptus tree ?
Or an ancient time ?
Your eyes :
Were they one day
The tips of two cups, tremulous,
Whose light leapt about
With pure nectar
Unveiling beauty's burden
And the latent desire of men,
The scorching burn
Of lightnings !
Beauty now proposes a toast,
To all those gathered around
Her windows, waiting
For the times of her awakening —
The corridors of her passion.
The soaring beam, shooting,
Announcing that a unique glory looks on,
That people crane their necks,
Trying to capture the imminent moment !
But do they know
That Beauty's steps to the river

Are hesitant,
And that she, in spite of her beauty crown,
Is frightened ?
Only the river knows
When her lineaments are submerged
When her charms are embraced,
That she went into the water,
In fear !

* * *

What a figure !
Oh, for your high stature !
Do the roots of its features
Extend deep in
The amber earth ?
Will it,
When legs are intertwined
Or looking up to a date at night,
Draw its charmed curtains
And fire of burning longings —
When she drinks, from the river honey,

Her brightness,
To light up the eyes of her lanterns,
The branches carrying her bunches of grapes,
Swaying on her bank,
Standing !
Did she see what her lovers saw ?
Did she hear
What the winds have roared
To one another,
In the farthest solitudes ?
Did she realize
That she was the target of slander,
When the heads met of palm trees
And of tall reeds,
To declare that 'Beauty',
Who's in love with the river,
Was unfaithful,
That her worship rites were false ?

*   *   *

In a morning that never came,
She left.

Some say
She stood on the bank
In perplexity,
Looking round as though
Chased out by townsfolk
And everybody's eyes,
Whilst she still stood
Trembling !
It was said :
There she was, naked,
Having emerged from the river's mouth,
Fled the embrace of the dodging lover,
To look for a fig-leaf
With which to hide 'herself',
Covering 'herself' with both hands,
For fear of scandal.
It was said :
She felt it was late
And so proceeded,
Caring nought for those who whispered,
Or looked,
Or cursed.

She listened, intently,
Perhaps a new morrow will come,
When she might replace
One people with another,
One face with another,
Cursing all her followers,
Sect by sect !
Whatever has changed the river,
Giving it blood-colour ?
Has she anything left,
Apart from that taste, so bitter ?
She filled her lungs
With a breeze blowing,
Then went away, bleeding !

Homeland or Woman ?

Homeland or woman ?
Your features are
Interchangeable !
The same road leads to both,
And the heart is weighed down
By the burden,
Though inured to temptation
And madness aroused !
The two lovers are not separated
By a line,
Or thread,
Or time
To set a bourn
To life,
After a 'fretful stir',

But then fire breaks out !
Just bend your head
And night will fall;
Desires will sally forth
From their dens,
Drawing a curtain over our balcony !
There's a homeland the size
Of the universe
In the palms of your hands,
Washed with eye waters !
Embarking, in your sea,
With pregnant sails,
Venturing into other seas !
You sit high on the wave,
Extracting pearls,
Casting sea weeds
And oysters !
It's dissolving in you, you in it,
So that there are no wharfs,
No shores, no harbours !
A homeland the size of the universe
Bound to your eyes,

As from them rises,
Day brilliance !

*   *   *

A homeland or woman ?
Perhaps when baptized,
Musk perfume flowed
And time ran in rivers !
On the valley the colour of the sun
Was poured,
And the face of the earth
Shone with singing !
O lady ! never stinting,
Never closing the door of major mercy
And halls of prayers !
They are all at your gates,
Intently listening,
Perhaps a sign will be given,
A glimpse forthcoming, a lightning,
And they will scramble,
Who will win ?
Who will fill the narcissus cup of his desires,

Making a plaything of the hours,
A circle of ecstasy ?
You have risen ?
— That was a braid of hair,
With bosky shades extending,
And branches, oak-like, spreading
Declaring they are in season,
The heavens deflowering !
The royal procession
Is quietly advancing,
Beautiful Nefertiti's come !
Get ready for the pageant,
You, who seek her company !
Here is a whole homeland walking,
And those the priests of the Nile valley,
Prayers are raised,
Abundant bounties are flowing,
And the whole world moved with hope !
Now extend a hand
To bring to life a soul in drought,
Cracking with thirst,
Aren't you the Nile in flood ?

Now smile,
People have hungry eyes,
And your charm is aglow,
Like live coals, and passions,
Vying, crowd in !
Such crowding is unworthy
Of your 'Presence',
Nor are the offerings
They carry,
Filling the vast space !
Have they hidden you ?
Not quite !
They can't !
Make your way through,
Advance !
The land is hungry !
You appear like the bust
Of a statue whose invisible half
We may only guess at
Inventing its glory !

* * *

Homeland or woman ?
One tries to keep pace
With the two sides,
As they mix and interlock !
How have the lines intertwined
In you,
Becoming a cross-bow,
With strings as taut as can be ?
You shy away
When, from behind the hedge-row,
Fingers come out to touch
The old face, resting on the high brow,
And a fear-engendering brink;
Have you ever seen a doe
Running, scurrying,
Out-pacing the flight
Of an arrow, unshot ?
The hunter persists, however,
In his effort, errant,
Expecting something to turn up !
Now past the harbour,
He's nagged by the intimation

That day is spent
The sun of his life set,
And he makes a bed of the earth !
Homeland or woman ?
I have my home in you,
This is your high portal,
My prop and stay,
The roof of my desires !
The sweet geniality of the world
No longer flows,
And companions are no longer
What they used to be,
Nor are the faces the same !
Have you now anything
To dispel this burning heat,
To provide shade for my caravans !?
There are brambles everywhere,
And you are a willow tree,
With tresses hanging down,
Both high and green,
Where palm-dove broods nestle;
Will you continue to draw

The rain-rich clouds
To fill my streams ?
Now,
Can someone read the stars.
Perhaps the stars will unveil
One's concealed fortune,
Abridging the impossible ?
You are but part of the cosm[illegible]lae.
Swimming in the light,
Quivering,
Posing the question :
Who will extend a hand
To the coming,
Celebrating
The birth of the world
And dwelling in beauty ?

The lovers are departing,
The company's disbanding,
And a pale glimmer on the horizon
Hesitantly, bashfully, flows on !
The turbulent waves continue
To break on the shore,
Unloading a burden
That had been borne
Unwillingly
And wearily !
They come every year,
As light-hearted as seagulls,
Settling at the first nest,
Or trap,
And go,
With heavy steps, heavy-hearted,

Dragging behind
An impossible bet !
You have not given us,
O summer ! that's gone too soon,
More experience of time,
Or knowledge of what will come,
Of night languages;
You have not revealed
More of life's fears
And sea sorrows
Which crowd in our hearts !
Oh, how we wished
You would've rained a little,
If only a few drops,
Of the geniality you carry,
So that it may rise within us,
And the experiences your hands bury
In the sand are
Trampled under-foot
By passers-by !
The sand smothers
The footsteps,
People,

Passions,
And dreams,
Power,
And innocent merry-making —
Leaving nothing behind
But a strange feeling,
And giddiness !
We're unaware
That the beach
Extending for ever,
Is lamenting its fortunes,
Behind the curtains
Of your brief, though long, nights !
The lovers are departed .
Patches of the low clouds that gather
Join the clouds fluttering
In the scorching fever,
Within the breast, before turning !
O summer ! that's gone too soon,
You haven't given them anything,
Apart from a few wrinkles,
And lines
On which life has woven,

— Without them knowing it —
An intricate cobweb,
And tears, frozen,
At certain spots in the eyes !
Oh, how time steals away,
Slipping from us,
Dissolving life itself !
We fall out of rhythm,
Unable to run as fast,
Nor do we have the years needed;
Even so, we cannot rest,
Maintaining the lunacy
And breathlessness !

* * *

O summer ! that's gone too soon !
Stop,
Tarry !
You're hardly aware
Of what you've given me !
When I encountered you,

On that day of my life gone,
Hesitantly, bashfully,
All I had prepared
Was a charming dream,
A green hope on which to move
To autumn,
Dreading no approaching winter,
Which might squeeze the heart dry,
Confining it to loneliness and misery !
You're not conscious of the size of your gifts,
Or the range of your bounty !
O generous giver !
You give without limit,
And your overflowing gifts are lethal !
So, be kind to us,
Give us the chance
To enjoy your pure honey,
One drop at a time,
To sip yet again
Until the ultimate ecstasy,
And drink yet again
Repeatedly !

You've given us
An abundant treasure
Which should fill a life-time
And keep it younger and fresher !

*　*　*

Stop ! Tarry !
In Jerusalem will come a winter,
Heavier than any other;
There are eyes which, for all
The tempestuous winds of despair,
Retain the glint of pride,
Watching the game in hand
Which doesn't seem to end !
And regard the oppressors as dwarfs
And their structures
As a hill on sand
Or air blown in air !
Oh, let them fashion
A universe of falsity
Of debauchery,

In the manner they fancy !
We still possess a dream
Which will tomorrow come,
It will surely come,
The dream of redressing the balance
And the taming of destiny !
Stop ! Tarry !
O summer, going away !
There is in Bagdad a pestilence,
Humiliated war-prisoners,
Half-captives,
Slave girls,
And men who've given to patience
A life-time entire
And nights with the magnitude
Of death and terror,
Nights that did scatter
In vain,
A hell flowing in Tigris waters,
Scorching the innocent !
The moon over *El-Karkh*
Has fallen in splinters
On the *Rusafa* embankment,

Sweet Euphrates is stifled,
Without a single drop of water !
When will Bagdad be rid
Of the rampant pestilence ?
When will in Bagdad rest
The verse of poets ?
When will God's wrath be lifted
From these skies ?

* * *

O summer ! that's gone too soon !
Stop ! Tarry !
What will you have to say
To the thousands coming
From the four corners of the earth ?
O summer of false hopes,
You've opened the gates
To the dream that long flirted with them,
So that in your mysterious face
They saw the features of homeland !
They are caught in the grip of the desert,
Looking for journey's end

In the aspirations fluttering
In a heart so spacious,
So kind and so shady —
Dream cities haven't been conquered,
And the destinations hoped for
Are still far away !
The sense of home,
Which grows in us
When separated from homeland,
Even as it strikes deep roots of grandeur,
Has given them but a glimpse
Of their expectations !
So listen now to people's songs,
Of anguish and lamentations,
Was it for this that you
O summer ! have looked
So long so charming ?
Quickly withdrawing,
In chagrin and humiliation ?
Leaving behind in the heart
A burden, pressing,
Heavily weighing ?

The eyes of your day
Are extinguished,
Just as they were yesterday !
Light up the glint of your eyes,
Let it fly away,
Venture into surprises
And depart,
Don't stop,
Don't stop,
There's no refuge,
Take none but you for a guide,
There's none but you for the times,
And there's no supplication wall !
You and the wind
Are all alone,

Who will have the power ?
The tide of the fire is overwhelming,
And this heart is weighed down
With dejection and death;
Hit your head against the hard rock,
Cross the river and the question
To the other bank and say :
This is the time for answers
To be decisive,
There's no alternative,
But how ?
When the whole world has changed,
And the times that had allured
You with justice,
But now proven a mirage —
Fantasies and illusion —
Still delude and deceive !
You're being seen as a usurper,
Your land as rightful property
For your murderer,
Your breath as encroachment,
Your eyes' light as guilt,
And your very life

As adjourned death !
Set your own fire,
And you'll kill fire with fire,
Explode, at the moment
Of death and resurrection,
Your cells !
They will disperse
In th' expanding space
To form the letters
Of a shining face !

* * *

O my little one whom I lament !
Oh, how often have I lamented,
When you have turned
Into atoms of hell
Which might wake up the dead,
And the breaths of a wind,
Freshened by the fragrance of your land,
Filled with a life-time of prophecies !
I now seek refuge in your shade,
And, tree-like, my heart grows,

And my branches
Extend into you !
My faith becomes a heaven,
The embers of my fury,
My ascension to glory,
With my spirit's despair,
Dissolving !
Climbing within you a flight of steps,
I have passed by a fenced space,
A dilapidated wall,
Bereaved women singing of horror
And woes,
And men who drag along
Coffins of patience,
Struggling in the chains of destiny !
You had nothing except
Your young body,
A rope is tightened around you, knotted,
And a heart radiating faith
In a halo of light !
The heart advanced,
You were not terrified,
When your hand touched

The dawn portal,
The trigger was closer to the heart,
The heart full of songs,
Of spring fragrance,
With more charm and magnificence !

* * *

O soul, ascending with fast steps
Your vast paradise,
As a ray of light,
A luminous face pure,
A call from the pinnacles
Flowing,
As the splinters scattered,
The sands, bowing,
Laid you in state;
An olive tree wished it could
Cover you with its eyelashes,
And the sky wished it could
Dismount !
You've gone back to mother earth,
An embryo once again,

Which will in the womb
Of mount Carmal remain
As embers burning
With a fire taking shape
At this hour whose timing
Was determined
By a dream awakened —
While each chest is heaving
With a rain-like promise pouring —
And the chimes are rising
To the highest star,
Tempting the young
To look their best !
And you did look your best !
Was there anything prettier
Than your endeavour ?
The bridge was there to be crossed,
An isthmus between two lives,
A river flowing between to worlds,
And steps to be taken
To the destiny
Precipitated !
We have won the bet, in your name,

For death is 'little',
And the bare wall of homeland
Rises, wall after wall,
Tents pitched after tents,
A sky extending after a sky,
Lethal blows reserved for the devils,
And a powerful people, though unarmed.
O my little one ! whose loss I have wept
With ember-like burning tears !
You're entombed in my heart,
And, while the universe-wide fire
Engulfed me, I could not see
But the smoke of a life-time wrinkled !
You are unique,
Shining in your revelation,
As a question persistently
Boring deep into us,
And a date too often adjourned !

The ashes are before you,
The sea is behind you,
So leave the Califate
To those who have deposed you !
This is the time for the rabble of the times
To exercise their wickedness,
Hoping to extend it;
They live,
Commit every kind of sin,
Wallowing in recklessness,
Without anybody noticing !
The ashes prevail ;
Advance,
Be the one to end up with nothing
In the bet,

No power to provoke,
Otherwise
You'll be the spanner thrown in
The works of the 'nobles',
The big plague,
And the dominant destruction !
Beware !
Your head will be the first to roll,
If raised one inch higher
Than where it is supposed to be
Or moved farther
From the opposing hunter's shoulder,
Or dared contemplate
Part of the amazing painting,
Scene by scene,
Such as the horizon crowding
With hungry people who stake their life
On the possession of a bullet,
Or the little ones walking
Under the shadow of coffins
To grow up in graves,
Or the old men who're qualified

By disability to put up with
The bitterness
When the wall of this homeland
Collapses on them,
For then they rise as though
The wall was made of porcelain
And death an honour,
While the oppressors will think,
In their ignorance,
That such a dream of the martyr
Is luxury,
Or folly !

* * *

The race in which you no longer
Participate
Begins before the call to the dawn prayer,
Before the break of day
Which you won't see,
And before your admission of guilt,
Are you guilty ?

Grieve not !
For all are going round
On the roundabout,
Impelled by desire
Or fear,
Ambition,
Or contribution,
Or self-ingratiation,
Nearer the throne,
The Califate throne !
Everybody !
Those
Whom you had thought
Would rush, eager for the fray,
Would stand fast,
Or make a stand in-between !
But your voice still rings loud,
Still pricks the conscience
Of those who do not respond
But are self-embellished.
The ashes are before you !
A whole life-time awaiting,

When the wind will whirl in,
A simoom,
The water will turn
Into live coals
And foul drippings !
Even the devils will run away,
Trying to flee hell on the last day !
Tell animosities :
Your time is now, the grass is green,
Your space is full of snakes hatching,
Where the magic is overturned
To undo the magicians !
The tramps take refuge
In dark caves, and
Wild beasts come down
Across deserts searching the sand
For ruins !
There,
The globalism of conquerors
Will fly asunder,
Like broken glass splinters
Falling down on heads

Filled with pride but
Which must now surrender
To death, their master !
They're still pushed in the direction
Of contumacy,
And pride generates laxity,
In the hope that vengeance
Will heal the wounds,
Though vengeance is a fire
Burning perpetually !

* * *

O Ashes ! rise !
Can you tolerate a Zionist
Onslaught unresisted ?
Will you cede the holiest
Of your holy places
Being desecrated ?
Do they promise
To make you a partner
When around you

Are gathered all that see in you
A ray of hope
In the recovery of a usurped
Home and a land
Groaning under the burden
And a conclusion, in freedom,
Of the journey ?
Will you betray your blood ?
It's a homeland
Dwelling in the arteries
Of your heart, aorta-attached,
In your vision ablaze,
Moist on your forehead,
Portrayed in your faith,
With your wings flying,
Stored up in your depth,
To the ribs clinging !
So, advance !
There can be no going back !
The ashes are before you
The Nile behind you,
Boiling

In the chest with fiery
Exhalations,
And the banks, with their load,
Join the heaving billows !
It's a fountain springing
From the eyes of heaven
On planet earth,
Held by the fierce oppressors,
And a life-time as long
As time itself !
It's there, standing fast !
They'd thought it might retreat,
But it casts ever-growing shadows,
And comes forward in wave
After wave, in a procession
Of flaming fury !
It first flowed in the tears of Isis,
Down the centuries,
Through every pass,
Reclining secure,
For us to wash our sins away,
And pray,

Vowing to keep the covenant :
"How can I be worthy
Of a drop of your water ?
You're more sublime and pure !
I looked at my face
In you, at a glance,
In a page of your magnificence
And was terrified !
Is that my image in your mirror ?
How could I be such a stranger ?
I am alienated from my faith,
From my qualities,
And, embarrassed,
My power is drained away !
This is the time for purification,
In you,
So that I may ascend,
When you have given me a rank
On the scale of your qualities,
And am able to avert defeat,
Nay,
To fight it

For as long as I live,
Even if starved,
Long threatened,
Even if I had no other friend
But myself,
No other wall
But my own skin,
No other support except your water,
No other lamp but your face !
You're the companion
Who could never betray,
The spring that never ran dry,
The guide that never led astray,
You're time, old and new,
Time, for which there's no
Alternative !"
Let the attack of the ugly ashes
Persist !
Let it blast away, once for all,
The scant hope apparently feeble !
Let the booty be taken
By those who keep rushing,

The hirelings,
And the chanters !
It doesn't matter !
You alone will remain for ever !
You're the perfect integer,
A being real,
Sublime and beautiful !

To Amr Moussa
the man chosen by Mubarak
for the Arab League

You Have My Heart !

You have my heart !
O crystalline figure, a ray of light
Shining at a new dawn !
You have my heart !
O figure who, statue-like, are hewn
From fury, from noble sorrow,
From a pinnacle
Of a dream the colour of the impossible,
From the earth of a homeland,
The size of the universe,
Where the necks of men
In their thousands
Are held high and rise
In you, ascending,
To watch in your brow

Their lofty pride
And their face with grandeur shining,
Whilst you creatively pursue
Your advance up the paths of pride,
Like an electric current,
Carrying a heart consistently dissolving
In the great homeland that made you !

* * *

You have my heart,
When you move about
Our 'Arab homeland',
Seeking to fulfil your task !
Beware !
Thousands of scorpions and snakes
Are lurking everywhere !
Be on your guard,
For worms are boring in the turbans,
In moustaches and beards !
The antagonistic brothers
Are hiding their daggers
In their pockets;

Their blades quiver when meeting,
And are drunk when parting,
Looking for bloodshed !
But have no dread !
You have already weathered
Many a storm,
Passed by many a mine !
Many a henchman has been puzzled,
Trying to reach you but
Was always deflected !
How many falsehoods have you revealed,
While you, armed with faith,
Still held your head high,
Arguing with untruth,
Never bowing down,
Never shaken
By contumacious violence !

* * *

You have my heart !
Even as I watch eyefuls of

Sorrow being poured —
With power to crush the ribs !
I see you, O great agonist !
When you retire in the dark of night
And watch the horror that prevails
And the images crowding in,
Then ask a soul filled
With the sorrows of people :
How much can I do for them ?
Will this lank palm tree
Throb one day with a weight of dates ?
Some tears will flow
As you continue in the pitch dark night
To look for a ray of light,
For a planet to guide the travellers,
Or a far-away star beckoning !
I could see your hands rummaging,
And hitting the wall !
Beware !
It is only a 'house' of cards,
And the pillars of words
Will surely fall !

I could see you watching
An untruthful face wearing
The features of a swindler,
Holding the piercing spear
Of Antar, famed in Arab romance,
Parading on his horse,
Ecstatic with vainglory
And victory !
I could hear you cursing him,
As he tells his obvious lie
In broad daylight !
He who has outdone all fools,
Lengthening the line of stupidity,
And delusion,
Isn't worth a mere pointing finger,
So, don't bother !

* * *

You have my heart !
I see in the onslaught of tyranny
A deluge disturbing your dreams :

The ignoble rogues
Are beating the drums of war,
Showing the impossibility
Of peace !
Oh, let them build cities
On our debris,
Let them fill history
With hate and vengeance —
Pages to bequeath to the future —
For us to leave to our grandchildren !
Let them set their traps
For the peaceable passers-by;
Let them commit their crimes,
As they will be the passers-by,
And the land will remain
In the hands of its own people,
Even as the world is plotting
Against them !
They have a double worry :
They worry about the ignoble rogues
Of Zion, ever since they came;
And about the antagonistic brothers

Who have invented
In the "verbal language",
Imaginary guns and shells,
Fatal, no doubt, to the barbaric invaders !
Let them fall silent or be stoned !
The only language today is made up
Of stones !
So ask the speakers
To hold their tongues !
Let the eloquent abandon
The magic of words
And their sonority !
"Cast thy staff", Moussa*,
And undo such damned falsity !
Reveal the truth,
And shock them with it !
You will not be deceived by all this !
This is the time for a trumpet blast
Producing an earth tremor !

* A reference to the story of Moses in the Quran, as the addressee has the same name (*The battlements*, 117) from Arberry's Interpretation of the Quran.

Heroes should now have the power
To turn into shells
Exploding in hell !
Time-bombs directed against
The enemies of life !
Nothing remains in the hands
But the skin on the veins,
The quiver of the nerve
They have ruined !
This is the time for a trumpet blast
Calling on a nation to rise;
It has always been there,
But is now faced with the question :
'To be or not to be' !
In the land of Palestine
There's a sleepless old man
Listening to you !
You have my heart !
All your haters,
— Fortuhately well known to you —
Do not know
That people are your treasure !

Their chagrin has told them,
No one else, about you !
You have been a song,
An Egyptian gift,
A magical touch of these Nile waters
Pumped through the spirit of men !
Do they realize now what it means
To have honour,
To be always beyond question ?
Do they realize now what it means
To be an Egyptian soldier,
Seen by your wise leader
As battle-worthy,
Fit for the fray ?
If they did, they would've blessed
In you the spirit created
By Egypt and the gentle Nile
And the overflowing love
Instilled in you !

* * *

You have my heart !
You've come, christ-like,
To give the spirit back
To a dead man, lying in state,
So that the fragrance of the stolen land
May come alive in him,
And the echoes reverberate
Of the voices of those fallen,
With whose blood the world
Will turn green again,
And vines and olives will be in season,
And the men, all the men,
Will rise !
You have been vowed to fulfill
The promise,
The dream never abandoned,
Of a homeland
That will never bow down !
You have my heart !
You have my heart !

We can, in the absence of land,
Imagine a map,
And borders,
Then fill the borders with points,
So that the points grow into circles,
With a homeland therefrom emerging
And faces, wherein absence is nesting !
We shall live in them,
Move among the geographical features
And try to recover
That which is still far away,
Cast a look at the impossible horizon,
There !
There's no sound for the map to utter
There !

There is no colour
To leap among the circles,
No green,
No sand
Or water !
There !
Only the colour of blood,
And an elusive mirage !
But then we have the dream,
And we dream that
Here are home and byre,
A gate and bower !
And here is Palestinian thyme,
The vine and sweet odour !
An olive-tree waiting alone in patience
For the sad autumn
And the acrid winter,
The cellars of fire
And the slaughter !
Then,
Gradually,
They all vanish — the shades,

And the distance !
But here are our fingers,
Still holding the absent painting
And drawing lines
In a map in the clouds
Feeling moist with the tears
Rising from the heart !
We make a search
Among the points,
The circles
The lines
And crossing points,
And feel about to cry
When silence prevails within,
But we
Never
Die !

I said,
Let me now tame this mountain,
Then build my home in rock !
Others quarry out blocks for towers
Wherein their offspring are baptized,
And from which to follow up
Their perpetually-ascending stars,
In gains and conquests,
Realizing silk-wrapped dreams,
Though others still,
The passed-over and the passing through,
Seek shelter in the caves !
The mountains do their rounds in time,
Shining in the heat of the sun,
So high,
Their heights inviting,

Their appetizing summits tempting,
Though defying the climbers !
They are shrouded in their long
Night slumber,
But release their phantoms in space
And sing an epic to the dark,
Crowning their story with danger !
Mountains !
The towering, unshakable mountains
Are visionary space
Of translucence,
And caves
And dangers —
A legend carried by the wind
And taken round
— Whilst howling —
Speeding on and breaking
Through the ranks !

* * *

Submissively
I returned from my journey

Dejected, barely
Supporting myself,
With my shadow dogging me,
Behind but also before me !
I almost stumble,
Running into the shadows pouring,
Engaged by the phantoms gathering !
What had I borne ?
The tips of a night that
Slipped through my fingers
— Though promising good company —
And the tail-end of gibberish
— Which in vain I try to distinguish —
And a trench of grief in the heart
— Wherein I buried
A bunch of comrades —
And snow in myself,
Which I accepted,
And my sky was reassured
But rained despair,
Abiding sorrow and doubt !
I went back but never found

The wall and the couch
Where was my refuge,
Though the mountain still stood,
Still looking,
So high in the awful space,
Intruding into the sky,
Dubious ...
Shall I seek protection
In the inviolability
Of this wall, to float in
Revelations of discovery ?
Cities appear nebulous,
Departing in clouds,
Unsettled,
Cities like elusive fancy,
Coming closer
Then getting farther
And slipping away
Like a dodging mirage !
Do they envelop us ?
Do they dwell in us ?
Are they only apparent,

Or invented by our fancies,
So that we are therein put out ?
Fragile cities, .
Dispersed like dust,
Sinking,
Fleeing in memory !
Cities of escape !
So who will now save
The present moment ?
Oh, how can we believe it,
Even as it feeds on us,
Before hurling us
Into the impossible,
Concealed by another impossible !
These are the cities
Which we wish they were wastes,
And we mountains !

I have seen it,
— That which no one else sees !
I thought :
If I could put it in words,
In whatever words I could marshal,
Nobody would believe me;
People, most of them, will doubt my words,
Based on certainty
Or fancy !
'God be with him !' they'd say,
'Raving about that he can't know
'Seeing the invisible,
'And going so far astray !
'God be with him !'
....

Indeed, God be with me !
That which puzzles me
May not be new,
But what should I expect
Of the ignorant !
They are blind and sighted
In turn,
And what should I want
With the gang of murderers
Who control the fate of people
Though ultimately
The dregs of humanity !
What if you divulged the secret ?
Will they kill you ?
It has always been lawful
To shed the blood of lovers
— If ever they spoke
Or made a sign —
Will they release my tongue
By force, to let me talk
Interminably ... ?
So that they could uncover the bottom
Of my soul, the depths of my memory,

My precious possessions,
Conscious and unconscious,
And so see me naked,
As a new-born babe,
Even without blanket or cover !
— Why do they want us always
To be naked ? —
But then, their fears allayed,
I should be accepted
And their elder will mark
A place for me among them,
Perhaps I'd take that place
And say what I had been
Reluctant to say — that
Which I alone could see —
But I tightly shut my window
— When I bow my head within —
And cry !

* * *

I saw on the edge of the horizon
A smoke storm gathering,

With sparks flying all round,
And people rushing to no-where,
And little by little,
The smoke turning into snakes,
And people into night-mice,
The night pushed round by terror,
The horizon a fountain of blood,
And little by little,
The snakes turning into ropes,
Extending and coiling about all necks,
The creatures strangled,
The universe ablaze,
The flames neighing in space,
Then the earth would crash,
— whilst turning —
With the tail-end of the sky;
I saw what none else did,
Did what I saw augur ill ?
Is it doomsday ?
Or the footsteps of annihilation ?

* * *

I saw on the edge of the horizon
A flash of lightning,
Followed by thunder,
I thought it might rain,
And heaven's bounties pour down,
Realizing pent-up wishes,
Opening the obstinately shut gates,
And that the stinting hearts
Might grow green now again
And the parched souls drink their fill,
With the river overflowing,
Heaven's wrath lifted
Oppression dispelled,
And the market-place flooded
With pride !
But alas !
My hope was blasted !
The lightning and thunder
Did little good !
Fallacious lightning
And barren thunder !
But the horizon still rained

Molten copper,
Awakening buried rancour
Vengeance,
Grudges !
And 'Starvation army'
Is decimating the naive and the patient,
The submissive,
And the foolish !

*   *   *

I saw a hand from afar extended
And realized that the end was at hand,
That I was being drawn in that situation
Of utter terror, and was horrified !
How strange !
How did I weaken when mention was made
Of the inevitable ?
How did I roll back into myself,
Seeking a neglected portion of my soul,
Part of my composure,
And pride in the past !
Forgetful, I denied;

Remembering, I got confirmation !
There's no longer any room
For imagination,
For a far horizon unfolding,
Or the face on an icon
Peeping at me in prayer !
Your vision, our learned man,
Is fallacious !
It will perpetually hover
Interveniently,
Never descending to the people
Never ascending to heaven !
It is the isthmus
Which captures
Anyone crossing,
To make them fall in the hell fire
Of the question :
Where is salvation ?
How can we save ourselves ?
I saw ...
I pulled myself together
And went away !

At a time, when time slips through
Our fingers, like the whistle
Of a passing night train
Skipping tiny stations,
I look for a refuge,
Now you have departed,
But find no shelter
From a mad, overwhelming night !
I'm being stifled to death,
With the dark seeping by stealth
Into my soul,
Swaying,
I feel about to fall,
With a heart emaciated
By weariness !

I'm overcome by the boredom
Of burning time,
By a poisoned drink
In an overflowing cup,
Waiting for the morning
Of your arrival
From the night of exile,
To revive the desert ashes
And the lunacy of desire
In all things; to bring back
A growing consciousness,
In the expanse of desolate, loathsome days,
And a ray of mercy
To the naked, thirsty heart !
Here you come !
Your yellow rose is in my hand,
In your eyes are tears, Andalusian,
The river runs again,
Snow will catch fire and burn
And even sorrows can
Have a different flavour,
A different taste !

Who will secure
An ambiguous promise borne
By time to come ?
Is it enough for us to stick together,
And so ensure
The approach of the train of time,
Which runs so fast
Like a galloping horse,
Tempted by the space
Of the wilderness,
Stopping a while, then departing,
Turning us again into strangers ?
Is it enough to eat together
The bread of damned days,
Repeating that the universe
Is rotten, that people are
Wild beasts devouring
The dreams of poets ?
Will you dangle a rope
To rescue a man drowning,
Fighting the billows
But by the flood overwhelmed ?

Our hearts tonight
Are pierced !
We're swept over
By a cosmic hurricane
Fraught with all the evils of the world,
And the wickedness of primal aberration !
Our two lives tonight are joined
And stand as a barrier
In the face of adversity,
The ugliness pervading every quarter,
Tonight we're provided for, sufficiently,
With a whole legacy
Of sorrows !

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Regitration No. 7194 / 2003

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